“The Agency of Prostitutes in the Late Middle Ages”

Research Thesis

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by

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While prostitution has historically been viewed as a sinful trade that stemmed primarily from the lust and licentiousness of unruly women, it was nevertheless a relatively common practice in Europe during the late Middle Ages. As immoral as prostitution was, ecclesiastical and secular powers still permitted its practice. Deemed a "necessary evil" and an opportunity to perform Catholic good works by converting women who had strayed, society turned an overall blind eye to the profits of these women by allowing them to continue to work. The trade became a "women's sphere," and men participated in the brothels' activities generally only as paying customers or from a hands-off approach of managing at upper levels, such as a landlord. Although it is accepted that the profession was seen as degrading and the women were subjected to a certain level of victimization, it is significant that they were still permitted to participate in something so straightforwardly sinful and they themselves were able to exercise influence within the trade. Female bawds ran brothels, women taught each other what they needed to know to be prostitutes, and prostitution provided women with the agency to survive without a man's help or control.

Sexuality, Prostitution, and Christian Doctrine

> And there came one of the seven angels, who had the seven vials, and spoke with me, saying: Come, I will shew thee the condemnation of the great harlot, who sitteth upon many waters, With whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication; and they who inhabit the earth, have been made drunk with the wine of her whoredom. And he took me away in spirit into the desert. And I saw a woman sitting upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns…. And on her forehead a name was written: A mystery, Babylon the great, the mother of the fornications, and the abominations of the earth. And I saw the woman drunk with the blood of the

> saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus…. And [the angel] said to me: The waters which thou sawest, where the harlot sitteth, are peoples, and nations, and tongues. And the ten horns which thou sawest in the beast: these shall hate the harlot, and shall make her desolate and naked, and shall eat her flesh, and shall burn her with fire.[1]

Unquestionably, both the whore of Babylon and the beast upon which she sits are symbolic. There are many different speculations as to what the correct interpretation of this chapter is, but Augustine argues that Babylon is representative of a "love of the world." In addition to the city itself, Richard Challoner, an eighteenth-century bishop, speculates that the whore could even be a personification of the Devil himself.[2] The beast she rides, a clear double entendre, "may signify the power of the devil."[3] The biblical imagery of a sinful prostitute -- identified by both the sexually charged terms "whore" and "harlot" and also by the physical marking on her forehead, which was a common identifier for ancient Roman prostitutes – and her devilish monster are terrifying. This portrayal raises the question of why the Catholic Church tolerated, and sometimes even supported, prostitution up until the beginning of the early modern Era.

The medieval Church, and therefore the rest of society, tolerated prostitution because they saw it as a "necessary evil." This idea originated with the early Church fathers, whose words were still deeply respected by people in the late Middle Ages. Theologians believed that without prostitution, respectable women would be corrupted and men would turn to acts of

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[1] Revelation 17:1-3,5-6, 15-16 (Douay-Rheims Version)

[2] Augustine, "Expositions on the Psalms," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series,* trans. J.E. Tweed, ed. by Philip Schaff, (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888), vol. 8, Online; Revelation 17:5 (DRV)

[3] Revelation 17:8 (DRV)

sodomy.[4] Because fallen mankind inevitably gave in to lust, a sexual outlet was thought imperative to maintain social order. The prostitute was already damned, so Augustine concluded that if a man had nonprocreative sex with her, at the very least he would avoid corrupting a woman who had not sinned carnally.[5] Paul believed that marital sex was "a safeguard against human weakness," just as Augustine believed prostitution was a safeguard against lust.

The sexual relationship between the prostitute and her community was analogous to that of wife and husband. Because of a prostitute's classification as everyone's property, she was subjected to the same "conjugal debt," that is, the "duty to perform sexually at the request of [her] mate," as husband and wife were to each other.[6] The Church believed that a wife gave her husband consent to sex when they married, while a prostitute gave her consent to the community when she joined the sex business. Thus, there was no justification for a prostitute to refuse any man's sexual advances.[7] Paul said that "[a] wife has no authority over her body."[8] While he was speaking specifically in reference to a married couple, there is a definite parallel in these beliefs that sex is essentially something to be "owed" in certain circumstances such as

[4] The medieval understanding of sodomy is broader than the modern understanding. Most non-procreative sex acts would have been considered sodomy.

[5] Ruth Mazo Karras, "The Regulation of Brothels in Later Medieval England," *Signs* 14.2 (1989), 399.

[6] Elizabeth Makowski, "The Conjugal Debt and Medieval Canon Law," *Journal of Medieval History* 3 (1977), 99.

[7] Jeffrey Richards, *Sex Dissidence and Damnation: Minority Groups in the Middle Ages*, (London: Routledge, 2004), 31.

[8] Makowski, "Conjugal Debt and Medieval Canon Law," 100.

marriage or prostitution, and people—especially women-- do not necessarily get to be in control of their bodies.

The same theologians discussed topics regarding the responsibilities women had with respect to their sexuality. Even if they were not completely successful in regulating a woman's marital sexuality, society accepted these viewpoints and influenced late medieval Western attitudes toward human sexuality.[9] The implication of a prostitute belonging to everyone was that she could not be raped because intercourse was a debt she owed. Additionally, in many places, she was not allowed to have a favorite customer or reject a customer. Her service was just that: a service. If the municipality controlled the brothel, she had no say in how she was used.[10] Mutual consent was required to refuse the conjugal debt, meaning both parties had to consent not to engage in intercourse. If the prostitute did not want to sleep with a customer but her potential customer did, the requirement of mutual consent of refusal, according to the conjugal debt, was not satisfied. Thus, she had a responsibility to fill.[11] In the eyes of canonists, a practicing prostitute existed as a societal tool as an outlet for lust rather than as a person.

Christianity deemed men sinful as a result of their humanity or because an individual man was evil, but women were seen as sinful because of their sex, and thus all women were inherently sinful.[12] For women, "piety was to be individual behavior, impiety happened in

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[9] Makowski, "Conjugal Debt and Medieval Canon Law," 99.

[10] Karras, "Regulation of Brothels," 405.

[11] Makowski, "Conjugal Debt and Medieval Canon Law," 99.

[12] Katherine L. French, *The Good Women of the Parish: Gender and Religion After the Black Death* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 200.

groups."[13] Historically, theologians saw women as "lustful, vain, and greedy" because they are the descendants of Eve.[14] Medieval sermons frequently brought up the licentiousness of women, their vanity, and their "shrewishness."[15] The clergy often complained that women only attended church due to their inherent sinfulness. Instead of being motivated by piety, they were motivated by "lust, ambition, and vanity." In the eyes of the clergy, attending church was simply an outlet for women to gossip and flirt with their neighbors or show off their new clothes.[16]

Social views of sexuality mimicked those of the Church. After the Black Death, chroniclers blamed economic and social changes on declines in women's morality.[17] They "accused women of giving into their lustful and vain natures, becoming willful and ungovernable."[18] Women's speech was reclassified as " transgressive and [it was] associated with gossip, frivolity, and sexual promiscuity."[19] As Katherine French notes, regardless of whether this was true, many in society believed it was and judged the behavior of women accordingly.[20] Societal powers kept a more watchful eye for "evidence" of these behaviors.

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[13] Ibid., 208.

[14] Ibid., 201.

[15] Ruth Mazo Karras, "Holy Harlots: Prostitute Saints in Medieval Legend," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1, no. 1 (1990), 4.

[16] French, *The Good Women of the Parish,* 2-3.

[17] Ibid., 3 & 6.

[18] Ibid., 4.

[19] Ibid., 99.

[20] Ibid., 10.

Crimes associated with women—such as gossiping, eavesdropping, and sexual misconduct—were increasingly prosecuted by the local courts, and contemporary writings put emphasis on modesty, passivity, submission, and silence as virtuous female behaviors that many people feared women were abandoning.[21]

Discrepancies and ambiguity in the Bible led to a lot of confusion concerning what people should actually believe, leaving authorities in the Church to dictate acceptable behavior and guide the laity in the interpretation of the Bible.[22] For example, although some information can be inferred from his references to divorce and remarriage, Jesus never explicitly says anything about sex in the Bible.[23] Instead, the writings of the Church Fathers set the foundation for the larger societal attitude toward prostitution in the late Middle Ages. Saint Augustine of Hippo's writing stands out as the most influential.

Before becoming a priest, Augustine had a crisis about his inability to control his sexual desires.[24] As a reformed sinner, Augustine could empathize with a repentant prostitute, and his past influenced his later teachings regarding sexuality. To Augustine, all sex is sin; even procreative sex is a "contaminant of our species" and "every child could literally be said to have been conceived in the sin of its parents."[25] He went so far as to declare that those who killed

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[21] Ibid., 4.

[22] Vern L. Bullough, "Introduction: The Christian Inheritance," in *Sexual Practices & the Medieval Church*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James Brundage (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1982), 2.

[23] Ibid., 1.

[24] Vern L. Bullough, "Sex Education in Medieval Christianity," *The Journal of Sex Research* 13, no. 3, (1977), 185.

[25] Joan Young Gregg, *Devils, Women, and Jews: Reflections of the other in Medieval Sermon Stories* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), 92.; Bullough, "Sex Education," 186.

themselves to avoid rape merited forgiveness for their suicide, although he did not promote their actions.[26] He believed that abstaining completely from sex was ideal, but marriage made the act less sinful. However, for marital sex to be "good" and not "evil," it needed to be done without lust, for the purpose of procreation.[27] By keeping sex within the confines of marriage, with the goal of human generation, and without lust, sex is still sinful; however, it loses *some* of its inherent sinfulness.[28] He compared it to a person's relationship with food: eating to sustain one's well-being is not sinful even though gluttony is a sin heavily associated with the intake of food. What matters is whether the food-- or the sex—is ingested or performed "in due manner and order."[29]

Augustine argued that Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden caused sexual lust; prior to the Fall, they had not engaged in sexual intercourse.[30] Because lust drove Eve's role in the Fall, her punishment was a sexual one. Men could not attain spiritual perfection while blinded by sexual arousal because when filled with lust, men had no room in their souls for the love of God.[31] Women present a danger to men's spirituality because they incite arousal and make it difficult for the involuntarily lustful men to prioritize their

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[26] Gregg, *Devils, Women, and Jews*, 105.

[27] Bullough, "Sex Education," 187.

[28] Ibid., 186.

[29] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1911-1925), II.153.2.

[30] Bullough, "Sex Education," 186.

[31] Gregg, *Devils, Women, and Jews*, 92.

relationship with God.[32] As for prostitution, Augustine "found nothing more sordid, more void of modesty, [and] more full of shame." However, without brothels and prostitutes, he believed that lust would become uncontrollable and endanger established patterns of sexual relationships.[33] He wrote, "If you expel prostitutes from society, you will unsettle everything on account of lusts."[34] In "De ordine," he compared prostitution to a sewer in a palace and argued that if one removes the sewer, the palace would be filled with pollution resulting from uncontrolled fornication.[35] Within Augustine's teachings, a prostitute is both the epitome of sinfulness and protector of the fabric of society.[36]

Saint Thomas Aquinas agrees with Augustine about many things, including that sex should only be for procreative purposes. To Aquinas, lust is, without a doubt, sinful. He stated that "[t]he more necessary a thing is, the more it behooves one to observe the order of reason in its regard; wherefore the more sinful it becomes if the order of reason be forsaken…. Now lust consists essentially in exceeding the order and mode of reason in the matter of venereal acts."[37] He also argued that virginity is preferable to conjugal continence because of "the example of Christ Who both chose a virgin for His mother, and remained Himself a virgin, and

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[32] Ibid., 93.

[33] Vern L. Bullough, "The Prostitute in the Early Middle Ages," in *Sexual Practices & the Medieval Church*, ed. Vern L Bullough and James Brundage (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1982), 36.

[34] Richards, *Sex Dissidence and Damnation*, 118.

[35] David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 154.

[36] Karras, "Holy Harlots," 4.

[37] Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, II.53.3.

by the teaching of the Apostle who counsels virginity as the greater good."[38] He considered sins against nature, such as bestiality, sodomy, masturbation, and deviations from the prescribed position for intercourse, as some of the most serious sins because they went against the natural purpose of having sex.[39] Since prostitution consists of sexual activity for pleasure rather than procreation, he considered this a sin against nature as well. However, Aquinas believed that "[t]he opposite of lust is not found in many, since men are more inclined to pleasure."[40] He quoted the sewer in a palace analogy that Augustine used and was concerned that if prostitution was prohibited, "the world would be filled with 'sodomy' and other such crimes."[41] Because of the necessary role prostitution played in society, Aquinas argued that the bigger cause for concern in prostitution is that it is a "venal" sin, meaning that the prostitute's morals were vulnerable to bribery.[42] Prostitution serves as a gatekeeper for the other "sins against nature."

Describing a Prostitute

Medieval society often compared prostitutes with other sectors of people in society, especially in legal documents. The language they used to refer to prostitutes in contemporary writings creates confusion regarding whether a woman was actually working as a prostitute.

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[38] Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, II.152.4.

[39] Richards, *Sex Dissidence and Damnation*, 31.

[40] Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, II.153.3.

[41] Bullough, "The Prostitute in the Early Middle Ages," 36.

[42] Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, II.154.2.

Instead of focusing on the transactional element of prostitution, medieval society used words or terms that targeted the sexual nature of their sins. According to James Brundage, medieval canonists used terms that highlighted the sexual nature of their sins to identify their promiscuity.[43] The Latin phrase *meretrix communis* means much the same as the modern usage of "common whore," making it difficult for historians to tell if a woman was being accused of prostitution or simply promiscuity.[44] When the English word "prostitute" came into usage among the other terms meaning "whore" in the sixteenth century, it was used to describe any promiscuous woman, regardless of whether money was exchanged.[45] For prostitutes who also worked in another trade (which many did), they were referred to by the names of their other position to distinguish between the different women also working as prostitutes in the area.[46] Terms for the brothels themselves were indistinct as well; they were called women's houses, friendship houses, daughter houses, aunt's houses, small houses, rose gardens, jailhouses, temple houses, temples, joy houses, clap houses, common houses, abbeys, lupanarias, great houses, public houses, and bordellos, among other terms.[47]

In the Low Countries, the term *oneerbaere wive* was used in the fifteenth century to talk

[43] James A. Brundage, "Prostitution in the Medieval Canon Law," *Signs* 1, no. 4, (1976), 825.

[44] Sara Butler, "Runaway Wives: Husband Desertion in Medieval England," *Journal of Social History*, (2006), 349.

[45] "prostitute, n.". OED Online. December 2020. Oxford University Press.

[46] Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Women and Prostitution: A Social History*, (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1987), 137.

[47] Ibid., 131.

about prostitutes, but it translates simply to "women without honor."[48] Similarly, in "Costums de Tortosa," the term *putana publica* describes prostitutes. While some informal insults toward prostitutes had nothing to do with the public nature of the trade, like the Spanish term *bagassa* (meaning "whore"), David Nirenberg argues that most of the legal terminology describing prostitutes places more of a focus on the public nature of the prostitute's position rather than the position itself.[49] Likewise, in England, the term "single woman" tended to be virtually interchangeable with "prostitute" due to the number of single women who turned to prostitution to support themselves.[50] Ruth Mazo Karras notes that this is because prostitutes, like single women, were a cause of concern to the community because they were not the property of an individual man and had to be "strictly regulated by the male civil authorities."[51] In London's church court records, these terms encompass adulterers and concubines in addition to prostitutes, whereas Parisians used a separate term to designate concubinage in their own church court records, likely to make a distinction regarding the fixedness of the situation.[52] In French, *meschine* could refer to any young woman, a woman or girl of noble

[48] Jelle Haemers "Étuves, bordels et maisons de bains à Louvain au XV^{e} siècle: une edition des contrats de location des *stoven* trouvés dans les registres échevinaux de la ville," *Handelingen van de Koninklijke Commissie voor Geschiedenis / Bulletin de la Commission Royale d'Histoire*, *185* (2019), 75.

[49] Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence,* 153.

[50] Butler, "Runaway Wives," 340.

[51] Karras, "Regulation of Brothels," 425.

[52] Karras, Ruth Mazo Karras, "The Regulation of Sexuality in the Late Middle Ages: England and France," *Speculum* 86, no. 4, (2011), 1024-1025.

birth, a maidservant, a concubine, or, in the case of *meschine de vie*, a woman of bad life.[53] A *fille de vie* referred to a woman of bad life, a courtesan, or a prostitute.[54] Both *fille d'amour* and *fille de joie* meant loose woman.[55] *Fillette* referred to a young woman or a prostitute.[56] The term *pute*, or variations of it such as *putain*, was borrowed from Old French and used in many different languages to describe a prostitute or a sexually promiscuous woman. It was the feminized version of the adjective *put*, which simply meant base, vile, or bad.[57]

Terms like *pucelle*, which also referred to unmarried young women, were not used to describe a prostitute due to the word's association with virginity. Similarly, the word "maid" in English also referred to women, or even in some cases to men without any sexual experience, especially if they were purposefully abstaining.[58] Conversely, both "whore" and "harlot" referred to any person who was having sex outside of marriage: prostitutes, concubines, mistresses, and fornicators-- male or female.[59] Songs performed at parish revels portrayed

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[53] Frédéric Godefroy, *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue française et de tous ses dialectes du IXe au XVe siècle,* Vol. 5, (Paris: F Vieweg, 1881), 272-273.; Jean-Baptiste La Curne de Sainte-Palaye, *Dictionnaire historique de l'ancien langage françois ou glossaire de la langue françoise depuis son origine jusqu'au siècle de Louis XIV*, Vol. 6, (Niort : L Favre, 1877), 350.

[54] Godefroy, *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue française*, Vol. 4, 3.

[55] La Curne de Sainte-Palaye, *Dictionnaire historique de l'ancien langage françois,* Vol. 6, 214.

[56] Ibid.*,* 215.

[57] "pute, n.". OED Online. December 2020. Oxford University Press.

[58] "maid, n.1". OED Online. December 2020. Oxford University Press.

[59] "harlot, n.". OED Online. December 2020. Oxford University Press..; "whore, n.". OED Online. December 2020. Oxford University Press.

unmarried women as either "lusty maidens, abandoned maidens, and victims of rape." These portrayals served as warnings about the consequences of sexual misbehavior.[60] The application of the terms "maid," "whore," and "harlot" to both genders further demonstrates that the underlying concern behind these terms was the absence or presence of sexual sin.

Prostitutes in Saints' Lives and Sermon Stories

Prostitute saints served as a way for the Church to teach society about prostitutes. Stories about sinners who became saints inspired medieval Christians with the idea that anyone could be forgiven.[61] They demonstrated that even people who have committed some of the most egregious sins could not only make it into heaven but could also achieve sainthood. The stories of prostitute saints in particular highlight the superiority of men and the inherent sinfulness of women.[62] According to Karras, the idea that women, in general, are lustful and promiscuous meant that a prostitute is more representative of the "everywoman" in medieval attitudes than a murderer is representative of the "everyman."[63] Mary Magdalene is probably the most significant woman in the cult of the prostitute saints.[64] She is arguably the most important woman in the Bible only after Mary, the mother of Jesus, because she was the one to find Jesus's tomb empty and was the first to witness his resurrection.[65] Aquinas described her

[60] French, *The Good Women of the Parish,* 144.

[61] Karras, "Holy Harlots," 3.

[62] Bullough, "Sex Education," 185.

[63] Karras, "Holy Harlots," 6.

[64] Mary Magdalene was not actually a prostitute—this is a medieval Catholic narrative born from misconception.

[65] Bullough, "Sex Education," 192.

as a prophet, "worthy enough to see the angels" and as an "apostle to the apostles" since she was tasked with announcing Christ's resurrection to his disciples.[66] Because of Mary Magdalene, society likely more often viewed prostitutes as "poor and exploited women, more to be pitied than condemned."[67] Prostitute saints were the ultimate medieval underdog story. They showed that "confession, contrition, and penance" could wipe away the worst of all sins.[68] In addition to Mary Magdalene, there were numerous other prostitute saints, including Saint Mary the Harlot or the Egyptian, Saint Afra, Saint Thaïs, and Saint Pelagia.[69]

Their stories generally had the moral that they were lost and forsaken and yet could still find Jesus Christ and their ultimate salvation.[70] For example, in the story of Saint Mary of Egypt, Mary left home and lived in Alexandria at the age of 12. Once there, she worked as a prostitute for 17 years.[71] In the Catalan version, she states that she "sinned publicly with [her] body, denying it to no man."[72] At the age of 29, she went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem out of curiosity. Mary paid for her passage by offering herself to sailors. After reaching Jerusalem, an invisible and irresistible force kept her from entering the church with the other pilgrims, so she became a hermit and lived in the desert for years. Although she was illiterate, she was divinely

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[66] Thomas Aquinas, "Biblical Commentary on the Gospel of John," in *St. Thomas Aquinas's Works in English,* ed. Fr. Joseph Kenny, O.P., (St. Isidore, n.d.), line 2519.

[67] Bullough, "Sex Education," 192.; Bullough, "The Prostitute in the Early Middle Ages," 38.

[68] Karras, "Holy Harlots," 3.

[69] Bullough, "The Prostitute in the Early Middle Ages," 38-39.

[70] Ibid., 40.

[71] David Hugh Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, 3rd ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 330.

[72] Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence,* 153.

instructed in the Christian faith. A devout monk by the name of Zosimus happened to meet her and listened to her. He arranged a second meeting so that he could bring holy communion for her to take, but by the time he had returned Mary had passed away. Zosimus buried her body in the desert with the help of a lion.[73]

In the story of Saint Thaïs, her mother forced her into prostitution at a young age, an example of the exploitation of a prostitute saint.[74] A man named Pascuncius (or in some versions, Paphnutius) talked to her privately about God. Because she initially enjoyed her life of prostitution and had an aim to "allure all men through her marvelous beauty, and drag them down with her," he disguised himself as a lover to gain an audience with her.[75] He said to her, "If you know God almighty, why have you lost and bedeviled so many souls as you have? For you not only are damned in your own soul but you must also give account for the other souls that have been damned through you."[76] He saves Thaïs from her own sins by leading her to God with a simple conversation that any person could use to talk to any prostitute. This conversation functions as an instructional method for how a good Christian should approach local prostitutes. He convinces Thaïs that the souls now damned to Hell of all who have sinned with her are her fault and makes her feel remorse for her sins.[77] In the Catalan version, Thaïs makes a public declaration that she has given up her sinful lifestyle.[78] The story ends with Thaïs

[73] Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, 330.

[74] Gregg, *Devils, Women, and Jews*, 149.

[75] Bullough and Bullough, *Women and Prostitution*, 122.

[76] Gregg, *Devils, Women, and Jews*, 149-150.

[77] Ibid., 150.

[78] Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence,* 154.

receiving absolution after a three-year penance in a small cell.[79]

Saint Pelagia was a beautiful but dissolute actress from Antioch and, at the peak of her success, had "many lovers, jewels, and servants."[80] While sitting at the tomb of Saint Julian, Nonnos, a Syrian bishop who also later became a saint in his own right, noticed Pelagia walking by and was "moved to tears by her zeal and success in her profession." Later, Pelagia walked into the church where Nonnos was preaching. She immediately converted and asked for baptism. After her conversion, she gave away all her ill-gotten gains, left her life of comfort and luxury, and went to live the remainder of her life as a hermit on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem.[81]

Stories that portrayed prostitutes in this light helped members of society to see them as people beyond their sinful ways. It humanized them and made them more tolerable; however, it is worth noting that many of the prostitute saints became hermits, suggesting that even after conversion, the Church preferred that these women were kept out of sight so they could focus on their relationship with God rather than give in to sinful temptation.[82] Hermits took on their

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[79] Gregg, *Devils, Women, and Jews*, 150.; Bullough and Bullough, *Women and Prostitution*, 122.

[80] The idea that prostitutes enjoyed the trade because of luxury fashion was a common one, historically. For example, the whore of Babylon is described as being "clothed round about with purple and scarlet, and gilt with gold, and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand, full of the abomination and filthiness of her fornication" and Emperor Justinian claimed that women joined the trade after being lured in by the fancy shoes.

[81] Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, 386.

[82] Because of the perceived inherent sexuality of their gender, medieval society often preferred women—especially women not governed by a man—to stay tucked away to help them resist the temptations of the world (e.g. cloistered nuns).

secluded life as a devotion to their "rejection of all worldly ties and interests."[83] In addition to Mary of Egypt, Thaïs, and Pelagia, Mary Magdalene also lived as a hermit in the Maritime Alps before dying at Saint Maximin.[84] A penitent prostitute saint was best portrayed rejecting the entirety of her previous lifestyle. These stories also helped to dissolve the separation between prostitutes and women; with effort, the prostitute could become like other women again.[85]

Joan Young Gregg argues that medieval homiletics of virgin martyrs play a similar role to that of the stories of prostitute saints by "reversing" their sinful sexuality.[86] Women were not naturally ready for salvation and "[o]nly by suppressing their natural selves and entering the state of physical purity could they achieve the spiritual purity required for eschatological reward."[87] In the exemplum "Of a Woman Who Would Rather Drown than Lose Her Chastity," a woman jumped from a boat to escape her two male attackers. When she jumped, she accidentally knocked over the boat and inadvertently killed the two men, proving that she had God on her side because she was willing to become a martyr.[88] In "A Nun Tears Out Her Eyes to Preserve Her Chastity," a nun was taken by men because of how beautiful her eyes were, so she

[83] Jo Ann McNamara, "Matres Patriae/Matres Ecclesiae: Women of Rome," in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*,3rd ed, ed. Renate Bridenthal, Susan Stuard, and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998), 96.

[84] Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, 330.

[85] Bullough, "The Prostitute in the Early Middle Ages," 40.

[86] Gregg, *Devils, Women, and Jews*, 105.

[87] Ibid., 104.

[88] Ibid., 148-149.

dutifully plucked them out to protect her chastity, making her a virgin martyr.[89] This story, in particular, shows how the church held women responsible for controlling men's sexual actions. The stories of Agnes, Apollonia, Barbara, Cecilia, Dorothy, Katherine, and Lucy also served as role models for young medieval women. These women supposedly lived in the second and third centuries when Christianity was illegal, and they refused to marry pagan Romans even though they were gruesomely tortured. They ultimately died to protect their chastity and their faith. These legends were so popular in the late Middle Ages that they prompted the creation of numerous cults.[90] Similarly, some female saints threatened to disfigure themselves by cutting off their noses to avoid an unwanted marriage, escape rape, or protect their virginity.[91]

Just as Christian society held virgin martyrs responsible for the safekeeping of their own chastity, it also held prostitutes responsible for protecting the chastity of society's respectable women by providing an acceptable sexual outlet for men. Vern Bullough notes that medieval men recognized that women had the potential for good or bad, and even if they were bad, they still were not beyond redemption.[92] In the saints' stories, men were the ones responsible for the prostitutes' conversion, and it did not take much persuasion to convince them to do so. To people in the late Middle Ages, the Bible and these sermon stories served as evidence that prostitutes were not just representations of evil and sin; these were people who had fallen on

[89] Ibid., 148.

[90] French, *The Good Women of the Parish,* 140.

[91] Valentin Groebner, "Losing Face, Saving Face: Noses and Honour in the Late Medieval Town," *History Workshop Journal* 40.1 (1995), 6.

[92] Bullough, "The Prostitute in the Early Middle Ages," 42.

hard times and, more importantly, could respond well to conversion attempts.[93]

Repentant Prostitutes

Early Christian stories about famous prostitutes differed from those told by the Greeks or Romans because they contained the moral that the women were lost but could still repent.[94] Although the Church emphasized celibacy and settled for marriage if that was not possible, they still saw repentance as "the fallback position of ultimate salvation" if all else failed.[95] In comparison, the Classical world saw prostitutes as low-status creatures who were not fit for the company of "proper" people. The Classical view is notably distinct from medieval doctrine, because medieval doctrine recognized that these women had both the capacity for "good" and "bad" in them, meaning that they could still be saved.[96] The push to reclaim prostitutes for the Christian faith has a long history. In the sixth century, Empress Theodora opened a convent for former prostitutes called *Metanoia.* In the early tenth century, Emperor Leo VI the Wise turned a brothel into a reformatory institution for fallen women.[97] The tenth-century nun Hroswitha of Gandersheim argued that prostitutes should be forgiven.[98] Emperor Michael IV did the same in the eleventh century.[99] By the twelfth century, attempts to encourage prostitutes to join the

[93] Bullough, "Sex Education," 192.

[94] Ibid., 193.

[95] Ibid., 194.

[96] Bullough, "The Prostitute in the Early Middle Ages," 34.

[97] Ibid., 37.

[98] Bullough and Bullough, *Women and Prostitution*, 121.

[99] Bullough, "The Prostitute in the Early Middle Ages," 37.

religious life were the favored courses of action for reformers.[100] In 1198 Pope Innocent III urged good Christians to try to reform prostitutes. In 1224, the Church made more efforts to create a special religious order for them. Three years later, Pope Gregory IX gave the highest ecclesiastical sanction to the Order of St. Mary Magdalene, designed specifically for repentant prostitutes.[101] Upon conversion, the repentant prostitutes generally either went to a religious house or got married. Often, joining a religious house did not mean becoming a nun; rather, the women stayed in a place that was organized like a convent so that repentant prostitutes were kept under supervision. For example, the "Soul House" established in fourteenth-century Vienna did not make those who joined take a vow of chastity or poverty and allowed women to leave upon getting married.[102]

Prostitutes leaving their licentious trade to join convents prompted some comparisons between religious houses and brothels. Medieval society was quick to pick out parallels between different groups of women living with minimal male supervision. Brothels served as a way to "cloister" prostitutes and keep them separated from society.[103] The bawd was often known as the "abbess" or "mother superior," and the prostitutes were often called "sisters."[104] If true convents were not being strict enough with their rules, society deemed them as corrupt, accused them of being brothels, and they were plagued by rumors that the nuns were having

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[100] Bullough and Bullough, *Women and Prostitution*, 129.

[101] Bullough, "Sex Education," 194.

[102] Bullough and Bullough, *Women and Prostitution*, 130.

[103] Richards, *Sex Dissidence and Damnation*, 127.

[104] Bullough and Bullough, *Women and Prostitution*, 126.; Richards, *Sex Dissidence and Damnation*, 127.

secret illegitimate children. Admittedly, these allegations were common to all monastic institutions. Monasteries that were not strict enough faced rumors and accusations that the monks were fornicating with loose women and wasting church money on prostitution.[105] Jeffrey Richards describes these accusations as symmetrical and argues, "[a]t the end of the scale celibate women in nunneries lived lives in imitation of the Virgin; at the other end, public women in cloisters expiated the sin of Eve by catering to male lust."[106]

A prostitute could also choose to redeem herself by marrying; however, this was not particularly common in practice.[107] To canonists, marriage was a less desirable solution than joining a convent and often required public penance and a special dispensation.[108] Pope Innocent II promoted the idea of marrying a prostitute by claiming that it was a charitable act that a man could do and that it would count for the remission of their own sins.[109] While it was more common for men to propose to the prostitute, a prostitute could also propose to a man who had been convicted of a crime and help lessen his punishment—a concrete example of the negation of sin a man received upon marrying a prostitute.[110] Although morally questionable, if a prostitute convinced a man to marry her under the guise that she was still a virgin, the

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[105] Bullough and Bullough, *Women and Prostitution*, 126.

[106] Richards, *Sex Dissidence and Damnation*, 128.

[107] Bullough, "The Prostitute in the Early Middle Ages," 41.; Ruth Mazo Karras, *Common Women,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 81.

[108] Bullough and Bullough, *Women and Prostitution*, 130.

[109] Bullough, "The Prostitute in the Early Middle Ages," 42.; Bullough and Bullough, *Women and Prostitution*, 130.

[110] Patricia Turning, "'And thus she will perish': Gender, Jurisdiction, and the Execution of Women in Late Medieval France," in *Death in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times,* ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 335.

marriage was legally valid as long as she did not continue to practice the trade.[111] For a prostitute to get out of the sex trade, she had to be able to support herself, which generally only feasibly left the options of marriage or a convent.[112]

Turning to Prostitution

Women often turned to prostitution out of necessity. They had few means to support themselves independently.[113] In the early fifteenth century, after the population began to stabilize from the impact of the Black Death, a backlash occurred in which guilds closed their ranks to women, making it less likely for women to find employment doing skilled work as they were pushed out of the labor force so they did not take away employment opportunities from men.[114] Chroniclers observed that the plague killed more men and children than women, causing a growing number of single women in villages, towns, and cities.[115] An uneven sex ratio in the community, a lack of a dowry, or a community with too few men who were in a position to get married until they were established in their own trades, could make it difficult for a

[111] Bullough and Bullough, *Women and Prostitution*, 130.

[112] Ibid., 138.

[113] In the mid-fifteenth century Mons, the most frequent charge against women was for theft—and according to judicial sources, many of the cases were due to necessity. Marie-Amélie Bourguignon and Bernard Dauven, « Une justice au féminin: Femmes victimes et coupables dans les Pays-Bas bourguignons au XV^e^ siècle," *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire,* 35, (2012), 219-220.

[114] Karras, "Holy Harlots," 4.; French, *The Good Women of the Parish,* 8.

[115] French, *The Good Women of the Parish,* 7 & 8.

woman to find a husband to support her.[116] As the cost of dowries went up throughout the Middle Ages, so did the age gap between marriage partners, creating yet another difficulty in finding a husband.[117] Imbalanced sex ratios caused by the plague sent more and more women migrating to towns looking for work or husbands. In addition to the lack of support from a husband, many rural women left their families and support networks behind when they relocated to urban centers, and there were few options beyond domestic service or prostitution.[118] Problems abroad also forced women to relocate to look for work, such as the crises in the cloth industry in Flanders or war occurring in their home countries.[119] Still, young girls who were new to the city and had no connections were particularly at risk of falling into prostitution to support themselves.[120] The majority of women in municipal brothels were foreign or from out of town. It was easier for the community to digest the idea that their local women were kept pure while "other" women were defiled.[121] Vulnerable women faced the possibility of being coerced into the field by procurers or even sold to rich merchants from

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[116] Karras, "Holy Harlots," 4.

[117] Susan Mosher Stuard, "The Dominion of Gender or How Women Fared in the High Middle Ages," in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*,3rd ed, ed. Renate Bridenthal, Susan Stuard, and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998), 139.

[118] Karras, *Common Women*, 56.

[119] Karras, *Common Women*, 57.; Jacques Rossiaud, *Medieval Prostitution,* Translated by Lydia G Cochrane, (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 34.

[120]French, *The Good Women of the Parish,* 8.; Karras, "Regulation of Brothels," 420.

[121] Richards, *Sex Dissidence and Damnation*, 128.

faraway countries.[122] Karras points out that some women may have seen the lifestyle of a prostitute as more "glamorous or profitable" than that of an embroideress.[123] Even still, it would seem that a very small percentage of women made the personal choice to prostitute themselves.[124] If a married woman deserted her husband, the economic hardship from living independently might drive her to seek out any possible way to make money, including prostitution.[125] Unwed mothers often found themselves in similar situations.[126] In late medieval Dijon, for example, the majority of prostitutes came from the population's poorest section.[127]

However, economic hardship was not simply a post-plague explanation for turning to prostitution; it had been a driving force for centuries. Like in the case of Empress Theodora and her sisters before her marriage to Justinian, women had long turned to prostitution for survival and economic independence.[128] Additionally, rape victims sometimes turned to prostitution, especially if they could not marry their attackers to restore their honor.[129] Victims of rape often lost status and could be shunned socially, even if the community had viewed them as

[122] Karras, "Regulation of Brothels," 420.

[123] Karras, *Common Women*, 64.

[124] Richards, *Sex Dissidence and Damnation*, 117.

[125] Butler, "Runaway Wives," 350.

[126] Karras, *Common Women*, 57.

[127] Richards, *Sex Dissidence and Damnation*, 116-117.

[128] Theresa Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 47.

[129] Karras, "Regulation of Brothels," 401.

innocent or respectable beforehand.[130] For many women, prostitution was not their only job.[131] They may have taken up another occupation such as spinning, a widespread activity among single women, but prostituted themselves to supplement their income from their day job to make ends meet.[132] In addition to prostitution, Eleanor Rykener, who will be discussed at greater length elsewhere in this dissertation, worked as an embroideress.[133] Prostitutes often followed armies and were "regarded as essential for taking care of the wounded, and for doing the necessary chores for the fighting men, including the cooking, laundry, and keeping the camp in order."[134] François Villon, a fifteenth-century French poet, speaks of prostitutes who were also helmet makers, glove-sellers, cobbler girls, sausage vendors, weavers, shawl makers, and purse sellers, showing that prostitutes could come from just about any trade.[135] Women in need probably saw the income from prostitution as a way to improve their stability since ecclesiastics believed that prostitutes should be entitled to keep whatever they earned as opposed to giving it to an owner or manager of the brothel.[136]

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[130] Richards, *Sex Dissidence and Damnation*, 40.

[131] Karras, "Regulation of Brothels," 415.

[132] Ibid., 418.

[133] David Lorenzo Boyd and Ruth Mazo Boyd and Karras, "The Interrogation of a Male Transvestite Prostitute in Fourteenth-Century London," *A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies GLQ*, Vol. 1, (1995), 463.

[134] Bullough and Bullough, *Women and Prostitution*, 129.

[135] François Villon, *The Poems of François Villon,* Trans. Galway Kinnell, (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1977), 62-65.

[136] Karras, "Regulation of Brothels," 421.

Organization of the Sex Trade

Although the term "bawd" in the medieval era could refer to anyone who engaged in matchmaking that was not intended to lead to marriage (e.g., recruiting a mistress) generally, it referred to female brothel keepers.[137] Bawds were women who had a large amount of control in the trade at the ground level. For those who operated without a brothel, it required neither capital nor training, making it a lucrative option.[138] For those who had some capital, brothel keepers were likely to turn a higher profit than the prostitutes themselves.[139] Bawds were independent women who were "unconstrained by the limits imposed on economically dependent wives, maids, or nuns."[140] In Southwark, the area immediately south of the Thames, public bathhouses, or "stews," often functioned as brothels. Local regulations required that the owners be men; however, their wives were legally permitted to assist them. Furthermore, fines assessed on stewholders in the Bishop of Winchester's liberty demonstrate that women did run stewhouses independently.[141] Additionally, records may not reflect completely the proportion of women managing brothels. When one was run jointly by a couple, often the courts accused and fined only the man because his wife was legally his dependent. Similarly, when a married woman managed a brothel, the court may have punished the husband for his wife's activities.

Much of the disdain for the profession is directed toward these women because of their

[137] Karras, *Common Women*, 73 & 74.

[138] Ibid., 74.

[139] Ibid., 56.

[140] Gregg, *Devils, Women, and Jews*, 97-98.

[141] Karras, "Regulation of Brothels," 412.

role in the "corruption" of other women. In *Le Testament,* Villon alludes to this. He says, "But who's to say these easy ladies/ I chat with on my daily rounds/ were not once honest girls themselves?"[142] The bawd became a symbolic figure of ungoverned female sexuality. She "pandered to male sexual appetites by providing female partners [and] threatened the sacred domain of marriage."[143] This was problematic because it undermined the importance of monogamy and the limitation of sex for procreative purposes.[144] Sermon stories often portrayed bawds negatively to serve as a warning of their evil. In "A Bawd's Warning to Her Husband," the bawd facilitated adultery between two married people. Even though the bawd herself was married, the story still portrays her as being independent from her husband.[145] She was given the option to repent before her death or be damned to Hell.[146] In "A Roper's False Wife," the story aims to prevent women from cheating on their husbands. Again, the bawd's role is a deceptive one: to lead people astray.[147] These stories reflect reality. In London, bawds found in the city were "ordered tonsured, shaved, and exhibited in the pillory for a first offense; a second offense resulted in imprisonment, and a third, expulsion from the city."[148] *Abscissio nasi*, or the punishment of cutting off someone's nose, was common for sex crimes as well and

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[142] Villon, *The Poems of François Villon,* 66-67.

[143] Gregg, *Devils, Women, and Jews*, 97.

[144] Ibid., 97-98.

[145] Ibid., 126.

[146] Ibid., 127.

[147] Ibid., 128.

[148] Bullough and Bullough, *Women and Prostitution*, 124.

often reserved for women.[149] In fourteenth-century Nuremberg, the municipal book of banishment, called *Achtbuch*, discusses a bawd who was punished by having her nose cut off.[150] Nuremberg regulations for women who "behaved like wantons" continued into the late fifteenth century with the goal of locking up procuresses.[151] Similarly, Augsburg municipal law threatened to cut off prostitutes' noses if they were found in areas where they were not supposed to be.[152] The punishments of bawds and prostitutes were often visual ones that signaled to the community that they had sinned.

In reality, bawds were often not responsible for procurement, especially if the prostitute worked illicitly or on a "more occasional or casual basis."[153] For example, in illicit English brothels, the bawd did not employ prostitutes, nor did they live with her. This was not always the case. Sometimes women had prostitutes working under the guise of live-in servants in private houses, or "bordelages."[154] Instead, prostitutes rented working space from her.[155] Houses of assignation, which were similar to motels that charge by the hour, provided a space for independent prostitutes to work as well as providing spaces for adulterous couples. Sometimes, the prostitutes worked in their customers' homes or lodgings; however, in this case, the customer had to be wealthy enough to have privacy and be either unmarried or

[149] Groebner, "Losing Face, Saving Face," 5.

[150] Ibid., 4.

[151] Ibid., 7.

[152] Ibid., 4.

[153] Karras, *Common Women*, 64.

[154] Richards, *Sex Dissidence and Damnation*, 117.

[155] Karras, "Regulation of Brothels," 417.

separated.[156] In municipal brothels, authorities required bawds to take oaths to follow regulations, prostitutes paid rent to the bawds, and everyone contributed to the household's bills. Regardless of the form of the brothel, brothel-keeping was an extremely profitable endeavor, so much so that the Church leased property to brothel keepers for profit, especially toward the end of the Middle Ages.[157] Bawds were considerably more likely to be involved as middlemen when there was an opportunity for high profit or a wealthier clientele.[158]

Prostitutes often relied on their working friends to help them find new customers. They acted as bawds for each other. For example, many prostitutes found their customers by word of mouth. A woman whose customer had a friend with them may refer her customer's friend to a working friend of hers. As in the case of the prostitutes Joan Wakelyn and her friend, Margery, this type of deal was often repeated and reciprocal. Margery referred Joan to a Lombard customer, and Joan gave her fourpence out of the twelvepence that she earned. Three days later, Joan referred Margery to a Venetian customer. Both women benefited from this partnership.[159] There tended to be a cooperative nature within the trade. The best bawds knew the prostitutes well and could select women who fit the customers' wishes, and the person most likely to know the prostitute well would have been a friend of hers.

Although certainly not a common situation, the case of John Rykener can shed some light on the way women worked with each other in the industry. Rykener, who called himself

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[156] Karras, *Common Women*, 73.

[157] Ibid., 126.

[158] Karras, *Common Women*, 64.

[159] Ibid., 74.

Eleanor, was a male cross-dressing prostitute from London who was apprehended by city authorities in December 1394.[160] His surviving deposition indicates that he "was first taught… to practice this detestable vice in the manner of a woman" by a woman named Anna, who was "the whore of a former servant of Sir Thomas Blount." The word "first" implies that other women continued to provide him with direction later. A woman named Elizabeth Brouderer "first dressed him in women's clothing." She clearly provided him with sound advice as a man named John Britby testified that after passing Rykener on the street in London dressed as a woman, he believed that Rykener was a woman. Instead of seeing Rykener solely as competition, the women assisted him in finding a way to make ends meet. It seems likely that mentorship of this nature was normal: they had also benefited from the help of more experienced prostitutes when they were first starting out.

The Rykener case also mentions that Brouderer solicited her daughter, Alice.[161] Preachers denounced poor urban parents who prostituted their daughters as a way to raise a dowry, so it is likely that this practice was more common than we might think.[162] Another example, Joan Chapman of Sandown in Kent, was charged with bringing her daughter, also named Alice, into the trade with her. Generally, the church criticized mothers for corrupting their daughters, leaving fathers free of blame.[163] The full attribution of responsibility to the mothers instead of the fathers demonstrates the late medieval connection between women

[160] Boyd and Karras, "The Interrogation of a Male Transvestite Prostitute," 459.

[161] Boyd and Karras, "The Interrogation of a Male Transvestite Prostitute," 463.

[162] Stuard, "The Dominion of Gender," 139.

[163] Karras, *Common Women*, 63.

and sexual sins. In addition to parents, there are also cases of husbands acting as bawds for their wives. Sometimes they pressured them, but sometimes the two worked in a partnership; however, it is difficult to get a clear picture of how their arrangements worked because the courts charged husbands as bawds if they encouraged or permitted their wives to have sex with any man, even if there was no compensation.[164]

Because the legal system ignored any evidence of the prostitute's cooperation with her family, it is difficult to tell how much of a voice a woman who entered prostitution through this route had. Regardless of whether she consented, her family members filled the role of the bawd and, like all bawds, were the ones most likely to be targeted for legal action. This is especially true in the secular courts. The church courts sometimes went after both parties to the sex act but also accused the bawd.[165] As Karras argues, "[b]laming the go-between, bawd, or procurer took some of the onus off the prostitute herself, but at the cost of denying her capacity for independent action….to blame only the procurer was to view the prostitute as passive and easily manipulated. The customer, for whose benefit the whole system operated, was the least often blamed."[166] It was easier for those in power to keep the association of prostitutes as pitiable women in need of saving if they placed the blame on the bawd. Because the focus is not placed on the prostitutes themselves, this tactic not only erases their true motives and thoughts in the historical records, but it also hid evidence of control that

[164] Ibid., 56.

[165] Ibid., 63.

[166] Ibid., 64.

prostitutes had from their contemporary society. By minimizing the prostitute and attacking the bawd, they infantilized her while going after the mother figure.

Prostitutes and Healthcare

A prostitute's ability to control her body and her health was significant because it enabled her to keep working and, therefore, keep supporting herself. Information pertaining to health was available for prostitutes to take care of themselves. One of the regulations put forth by King Henry II of England in 1161 was that women in the sex trade had to undergo regular health checks.[167] Sexually transmitted diseases were just one concern for prostitutes; they also had to worry about getting pregnant. Birth control methods were a "woman's secret" at the time, and the information was passed down from one woman to another, either from mother to daughter or from one working woman to another.[168] They used different herbal remedies as both antifertility agents and abortifacients.[169] In the Middle Ages, it was common knowledge to most women which plants were used for which purpose.[170] When birth control methods failed, medieval society did not necessarily approve of abortion, but it was tolerated if carried out during the first trimester.[171] In some cases, the definition of abortion differed from our modern usage where any attempt to eliminate an existing pregnancy is considered an abortion;

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[167] Richards, *Sex Dissidence and Damnation*, 120.

[168] John M. Riddle, "Contraception and Early Abortion in the Middle Ages," in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York: Garland, 1996), 261.

[169] Ibid., 262.

[170] Ibid., 263.

[171] Ibid., 267.

whereas, an abortion that occurred before quickening, or when the woman can begin to feel the movements of the fetus, was often seen as an attempt to stimulate menses to medieval society.

In late medieval Avignon, the bawd and surgeon examined prostitutes every Saturday to detect any signs of illness or pregnancy. If they discovered that one of them was pregnant, they provided her with special care to help prevent miscarriage.[172] In the event of the failure of contraceptive measures, pregnant women in the late Middle Ages did not need to worry about giving birth alone, even if they did not have any family or friends around. Hospitals became more prevalent during this era. In addition to being a place to give birth, hospitals also served as a refuge for the poor. If the mother happened to die during childbirth, her child was likely brought up by the hospital as a form of charity.[173]

Regulation and Restrictions

Attempts made to ban prostitution in the medieval era were generally unsuccessful due to its high demand, and usually followed by toleration and regulation of prostitution.[174] Legally, the majority of towns in England banned prostitution, but enforcement was not strict. Much of the time, punishment came in the form of regular fines charged to the people running the

[172] Bullough and Bullough, *Women and Prostitution*, 127.

[173] Fiona Harris Stoertz, "Suffering and Survival in Medieval English Childbirth," in *Medieval Family Roles: A Book of Essays*, ed. Cathy Jorgensen Itnyre, (New York: Routledge, 1996), 112.

[174] Karras, "Regulation of Brothels," 402.

brothels, essentially creating "de facto licensing fees."[175] These were manageable enough to keep the brothel running at a profit.[176]

Municipalities tolerated prostitution also due to the lucrative financial benefits that owning a brothel provided. Often, the people who *owned* the brothels were not the people who managed the brothels. They functioned as landlords and, due to the questionable nature of the activities of their tenants, could get away with charging high rents. Municipalities did not fine landlords; they targeted the brothel keepers. Landlords were often very powerful; they "might not look kindly on a municipal takeover of the trade and preferred illegality with ineffective enforcement."[177] Thus, these influential members of society helped to support the trade in areas where prostitution policies were stricter.

Most areas across Europe approached prostitution by regulating it instead of prohibiting it. Official establishments of brothels and regulation of the sex trade were not put in place to protect women, but instead, to maintain social order.[178] As seen in the regulations in Southwark, the lives of these women outside of the brothel were a different matter and, "brothel regulations [made] the prostitute's sexuality a commodity and controlled its sale."[179] However, these regulations only affected the women who were working legally, for example, within the stews of Southwark. Women working outside of the stews were already working

[175] Ibid., 407.

[176] Ibid., 408.

[177] Ibid., 425.

[178] Ibid., 402.

[179] Ibid., 426.

illicitly and they were even less likely to take heed of regulations.[180] Still, regulations served to "label" prostitutes and set them apart from others in order to protect honorable women from turning to prostitution. Churches often banned prostitutes from attending mass to prevent mingling. For example, Maria "Mariot" Harington, a prostitute in late fifteenth century London, caused a disruption in church when she attempted to sit among the respectable members of her parish. The wardens argued that it was inappropriate to subject the women who could afford to sit in the nave to that sort of company. They also feared that Harington would attempt to recruit other women.[181] In fact, authorities hoped to prevent prostitutes from speaking to respectable women at all.[182] Municipalities imposed sumptuary laws upon prostitutes in many areas of England to make prostitutes more identifiable. The severity of this legislation varied from town to town. London had specific types of clothing allowed for prostitutes, such as striped hoods, but Southwark only prohibited them from wearing aprons.[183] Southwark may have been more lenient in its dress code because the borough was more comfortable with prostitution in general. It was "one of the two jurisdictions in England where there were legal, officially sponsored brothels" and had regulations that were more similar to those in Continental brothels.[184]

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[180] Karras, *Common Women*, 56.

[181] French, *The Good Women of the Parish,* 95.

[182] Karras, "Regulation of Brothels," 403.

[183] Ibid., 421.

[184] Ibid., 405 & 410.

Municipalities legislated prostitution only after city residents felt threatened by the immorality, disorder, and scandal it caused.[185] Regulations addressed where prostitutes could live and where they could conduct business. Towns and cities assigned prostitutes specific streets in which to work; in smaller towns, they restricted prostitutes to one brothel.[186] Municipalities generally required prostitutes to live in the brothel (and usually board there) unless the city had an official "red-light district," such as Paris.[187] Of course, even in Paris, prostitutes often ignored the zoning rules, indicating that the city enforced the rules poorly or with derisory punishments or fines.[188] Most prostitutes tended to stay in their delineated areas rather than work illicitly elsewhere, perhaps because they were less likely to be harassed, had more customers available, and had a sense of solidarity with the other women working in the area.[189] Still, the presence of prostitutes working outside of their zones led to attempts in France during the mid to late thirteenth century and early fourteenth century to expel prostitutes from the cities and towns and re-purpose "red-light districts" that were officially licensed and overseen by the government.[190] By the fifteenth century, French brothels were municipally owned in most towns.[191] Municipally owned brothels and official "red-light districts" helped keep this sinful necessity unobtrusive and made the trade easier to ignore for

[185] Bourguignon and Dauven, « Une justice au féminin," 221-222.

[186] Karras, "Regulation of Brothels," 403.

[187] Ibid., 404.

[188] Richards, *Sex Dissidence and Damnation*, 123.

[189] Karras, "Regulation of Brothels," 426.

[190] Richards, *Sex Dissidence and Damnation*, 123.

[191] Ibid., 124.

those who were offended by prostitution.[192] When towns councils did not wish to allow official prostitution, they often instituted a "once a week" rule where prostitutes could stay overnight in town once a week then go back outside the walls afterward.[193] The "once a week" rule demonstrated the difficulty in outright prohibiting prostitution. Towns compromised by issuing legislation that regulated, rather than banning, prostitution.

The neighborhood of Southwark served as London's "red-light district." In the twelfth century, King Henry II (r. 1154-1189) ruled that the brothels had to stay closed on holy days, during religious festivals, while Parliament was sitting, or while the king was holding council meetings. Additionally, he ruled that although the prostitutes could work there, they were not legally allowed to reside there, and the maximum charge per week for a room was fourteen pence.[194] The city enforced curfews to control when women were practicing the profession, even inside of their homes.[195] King Edward III (r. 1327-1377) was even stricter about curfews for prostitutes.[196] During his reign, it was illegal to harbor a prostitute in one's home past curfew because the law required the prostitute to live in the brothel. This did not just mean acting as an accomplice to her crimes by keeping her hidden from legal ramifications, but also merely allowing her to stay there for any reason-- even if well-intentioned.[197] This legislation further ostracized prostitutes from the rest of "respectable" society. However, as Karras points

[192] Karras, "Regulation of Brothels," 401.

[193] Richards, *Sex Dissidence and Damnation*, 124.

[194] Ibid., 120.

[195] Karras, "Regulation of Brothels," 404.

[196] Richards, *Sex Dissidence and Damnation*, 121.

[197] Karras, "Regulation of Brothels," 416.

out, "[s]o few of the alleged prostitutes in the London ecclesiastical court were actually penalized that we may wonder whether the offense was being seriously regulated there."[198] Just because the crown put these restrictions in place does not mean that it enforced them.

Throughout Europe, both state and municipality often officially protected the brothels. In Rialto, Italy, the town was responsible for the protection and security of the municipal brothel.[199] In central and northern France between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, the *roi des ribauds* (or King of the Bawds, Beggars, and Vagabonds) acted as a "police type magistrate" and controlled prostitution.[200] He supervised prostitutes residing in the royal household in Paris for use by the palace staff and guests.[201] King Charles VII of France (r. 1422-1461) placed a Toulousian brothel "under royal protection and ordered the royal emblem of the fleur-de-lis placed on the house" after it had been attacked by the citizens of Toulouse.[202] These official efforts to protect brothels demonstrate that they remained there because municipal governments wanted them there, not just because they could not manage to get rid of them.

Sumptuary Laws

Sumptuary laws were one way in which lawmakers tried to exert control over

[198] Karras, " Regulation of Sexuality," 1029.

[199] Richards, *Sex Dissidence and Damnation*, 126.

[200] Bullough and Bullough, *Women and Prostitution*, 123.

[201] Richards, *Sex Dissidence and Damnation*, 125.

[202] Ibid., 124.

prostitutes by designating what they were and were not allowed to wear. Prostitutes were not the only people subjected to these laws; it was a common means to create a visual signifier of a person's standing in the community. Sumptuary laws also helped to distinguish between different social classes or to identify "othered" demographics, such as the Jewish population. The impact of the Black Death on the population made it easier for someone to advance socially; therefore, it became increasingly difficult to tell someone's "true" social status just by looking at their clothes.[203] By creating visual cues, from doing things like wearing clothes specified for prostitutes to dying their hair, they distinguished themselves from the respectable members of society.[204] By giving prostitutes their own specific sumptuary laws, it is evident that lawmakers were concerned about the influence prostitutes had upon other members of society if they were not immediately identifiable.

According to Carol Lansing, "[m]edieval lawmakers considered women's hems and factional warfare closely linked: a root cause of the lack of order was concupiscence, sensual appetites resistant to rational control."[205] Moral and theological arguments largely influenced these lawmakers in their thinking. For example, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Saint Bernardino of Siena criticized women for paying too much attention to their clothes and

[203] French, *The Good Women of the Parish,* 205.; Villon mentions "ladies all in fancy garb/regardless of their place in life" in lines 309-310 of *Le Testament.*

[204] Bullough and Bullough, *Women and Prostitution*, 125.

[205] Carol Lansing, "Gender and Civic Authority: Sexual Control in a Medieval Italian Town," *Journal of Social History* 31, no. 1 (1997), 33.

changing them too often because it was "a species of vainglory and offensive to God."[206] Later, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Orpheus de Cancellariis, a Franciscan preacher and moralist, argued that "luxury in clothing would provoke God's wrath [and] fancy dress, jewelry, and makeup manifested depraved or evil intentions stemming from lust or vanity."[207] By instituting sumptuary laws, medieval lawmakers attempted to "restrain frivolity, promote thrift, and encourage morality."[208]

There was no agreement across Europe on what prostitutes should wear as identifiers.[209] Rather, each area came up with its own regulations, often making their choices based on what the elites did not want to wear. In Milan, they wore black wool. In Bergamo, they wore yellow cloaks; while in Leipzig, they wore yellow cloaks trimmed in blue. In Vienna, they wore a yellow handkerchief attached to their shoulders.[210] In Augsburg, prostitutes wore green; this was also the case in fifteenth-century Avignon, Lyon, and Namur.[211] Beginning in the thirteenth century in Mons, prostitutes had to wear a yellow "thassiau," or strip of cloth, on their shoulder.[212] In Bristol, their hoods had to be made with striped fur and had to be

[206] James A. Brundage, "Sumptuary Laws and Prostitution in Late Medieval Italy," *Journal of Medieval History* 13, (1987), 347.

[207] Brundage, "Sumptuary Laws and Prostitution," 347.

[208] Ibid., 343.

[209] Bullough and Bullough, *Women and Prostitution*, 128.

[210] Ibid., 129.

[211] Brundage, "Sumptuary Laws and Prostitution," 346.; Bourguignon and Dauven, « Une justice au féminin," 223.

[212] Bourguignon and Dauven, « Une justice au féminin," 222.

different from the hoods worn by honorable women.[213] In London, the city forbid them from wearing furs or lining their cloaks with silk.[214] In Parma, they wore white cloaks.[215] In Siena, the city permitted only prostitutes to wear flat shoes or slippers in public.[216] In both Bern and Zurich, they wore red caps.[217] A 1423 regulation in Arras dictated that prostitutes had to wear a piece of ruddy cloth on their arm.[218] King Louis IX (r. 1226-1270) prohibited French prostitutes from wearing certain types of jewelry or fine cloth dresses.[219] He also gave the *roi des ribauds* the power to arrest or confine prostitutes who infringed upon these dress laws.[220] In areas under the jurisdiction of French kings, prostitutes often had to wear a special knot on the shoulder of their clothes, which was usually red.[221] In Avignon, under Queen Joanna of Naples and Provence (r. 1343-1382), prostitutes who refused to wear a red knot on their shoulder when leaving the brothel for any reason were "to be led through the city with drums playing, a red knot hanging at her shoulder so all could recognize her, and be publicly whipped." Upon continued rebellion, the city would expel her. Joanna sold Avignon to Pope Clement VI, and the brothel continued to operate under papal sponsorship with the same laws being

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213 Bullough and Bullough, *Women and Prostitution*, 124.

214 Brundage, "Sumptuary Laws and Prostitution," 346.

215 Bullough and Bullough, *Women and Prostitution*, 129.

216 Brundage, "Sumptuary Laws and Prostitution," 350.

217 Bullough and Bullough, *Women and Prostitution*, 129.

218 Bourguignon and Dauven, « Une justice au féminin," 223.

219 Bullough and Bullough, *Women and Prostitution*, 122.

220 Ibid., 123.

221 Ibid., 128.

enforced until at least the end of the fifteenth century, demonstrating that these laws transcended leadership changes and could last for hundreds of years.[222]

The clear lack of consistency in the sumptuary laws for prostitutes demonstrates that these were more individual, regional reactions to prostitution rather than an overarching European-wide reaction. Although many areas faced the same problem when dealing with the sex trade, their bigger concern when implementing these laws was that their own citizens could recognize someone involved in the trade; they were not particularly concerned if a traveler recognized the prostitutes. In fact, it is possible that it would benefit the town for a traveler to be corrupted by a prostitute since towns often profited from prostitution and a traveler's sins did not affect the respectability of the rest of the locals.

Sumptuary laws were sometimes the source of conflict between prostitutes and urban communities. For example, in fourteenth-century Toulouse, local prostitutes objected to the requirement that they wear white scarves and ribbons. When King Charles VI (1380-1422) visited, they presented him with a petition to request that he do away with the requirement. His approval of the petition so angered the respectable citizens of the town that they began harassing and assaulting the prostitutes whenever they were recognized. The dispute reached the point where the prostitutes "barricaded the doors of their brothel," which was problematic because profits from the brothel went to the city and the local university. As a result, the king put prostitutes under his protection. Subsequently, the city of Toulouse forced the brothel to move to another area of town to appease the respectable citizens. Eventually, the university built a new chateau as the town brothel so they could gain the land belonging to the second

[222] Ibid., 127.

brothel.[223]

The Toulouse dispute over sumptuary laws is noteworthy for multiple reasons. It is representative of the push and pull of regulation shaping prostitution during the late Middle Ages. Prostitutes did not want to be so easily distinguished from the honorable sector of society; rather, this regulation was imposed upon them against their will. The actions of the king demonstrate that he took seriously the prostitutes' concerns. Not only did these women feel confident enough to petition the king, but he also granted their request even though it was upsetting to the majority of citizens in the city. When the citizens lashed out at his decision, he did not attempt to appease them; rather, he chose to protect the prostitutes. Prostitution was an important factor in the city's economy and its impact was so significant that when they stopped business in retaliation for the treatment toward them, it caused enough of a drop in income to merit action from the king. Lastly, when forced to relocate, the city gave the prostitutes land that was desirable enough for the university to build a chateau to trade. This single dispute shows how integral prostitution was to the city of Toulouse.

Concluding Remarks

To medieval society, the biggest concern regarding prostitution was the sexual sin of the act as opposed to the transactional element. If a woman was willing to put herself into a marginal position in society by sacrificing her respectability, she had the opportunity to support herself without the help of a man. Prostitution was one of the few avenues for women to make their own money without complaints or pushback from men who were trying to remain in

[223] Ibid., 125-126.

control of the economics of a certain trade. Those who did care about the issues that prostitution was causing were considerably more concerned about the moral influence sex workers had on the respectable women in society than they were about the fact that women were profiting from the sex trade. People cared most about prostitution when it directly affected their own lives. For example, an individual showed concern if he was a customer, if she was mistaken for a prostitute because she wore similar clothing, if her husband slept with a prostitute, if a prostitute sat near his wife in church, or if he or she managed to convince a prostitute to repent and join a convent.

There is a certain hypocrisy to the fact that medieval authorities did not trust women enough to sit with each other in church without male supervision because they were afraid of what they might do, but turned a blind eye when women ran and worked in brothels together relatively unattended. Unless it was for the purpose of converting them back to Christianity, these women were not fully "people" in society's eyes; in most instances, they were already too far damned to care about and were primarily governed by hands-off regulations rather than being governed by men directly. Instead, the protective, and often oppressive, governance was directed toward respectable women. Even with regulations, prostitutes were integral enough to society to feel comfortable pushing the boundaries of their regulations or requesting that restrictions were lightened, like the prostitutes who petitioned the king in Toulouse.

By the early modern era, ideas about women and morality began to change throughout Europe in large part because of the Reformation. Early modern society had an increasing concern about women's sexuality. To the Protestants, marriage was a woman's highest calling and the best way to control her inevitable intense sexual urges, making an unmarried woman

seem suspect.[224] Prostitution was either made illegal or the regulations became stricter, depending on the area. Upon closing the brothels, they encouraged early marriages in an attempt to reduce the proportion of unmarried men and encourage sexual activity to take place within wedlock.[225] The insatiable sexual appetite of women was seen by society as a "threat to men's physical, mental, and moral fiber," and a "threat to the health of the nation" on a larger scale.[226] Joan Kelly-Gadol argues that female sexuality threatened public order by threatening male independence, "which was already under attack in the transition from feudalism to the modern state."[227] The image of the innocent, downtrodden prostitute that was common in the late Middle Ages began to dissipate and she was now seen as someone who exploited lustful men for financial gain.[228] In many Jacobean plays, empowered prostitutes were juxtaposed with disempowered clients.[229]

Female sexuality increasingly came under male control. In 1556, a French royal edict outlawed unmarried women from concealing their pregnancies, a crime punishable by death if

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[224] Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe,* 3rd ed, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 32-33.

[225] Brian Pullan, "Catholics, Protestants, and the Poor in Early Modern Europe," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 35, no. 3 (2005), 456.

[226] Jennifer Panek, ""This Base Stallion Trade": He-whores and Male Sexuality on the Early Modern Stage," *English Literary Renaissance* 40, no. 3 (2010), 363.

[227] Mary Elizabeth Perry, "Deviant Insiders: Legalized Prostitutes and a Consciousness of Women in Early Modern Seville," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 27, no. 1 (1985), 140.

[228] Panek, ""This Base Stallion Trade"," 378.

[229] Ibid., 379.

the concealed infant passed away before baptism, regardless of whether infanticide was suspected. England, Scotland, and various German states passed similar statutes to this throughout the seventeenth century.[230] Women began to be regularly imprisoned for their sexual crimes.[231] It became inappropriate for honorable women, regardless of social class, to hold a job where they dealt with non-familial males due to the possibility of causing a scandal.[232] Sometimes, confessors were charged with rape, seduction, or solicitation because of their close, private relationships with women.[233]

In areas where prostitution was still legal (primarily Southern Europe), the justification that authority figures made changed. The idea of prostitution being a "necessary evil" was abandoned throughout Europe. Protestants especially rejected this idea, believing that people who "made allowances for improper behavior to avoid general wickedness" were responsible for "encouraging, or at least condoning, moral laxity."[234] For those areas retaining legal prostitution, the motive became a financial one. For example, in the late sixteenth century, Rome's lay governing body, the *Popolo Romano*, argued against Pope Pius V's efforts to expel wealthy prostitutes from the city by saying that they "were central to the city's economic interests and tax revenue."[235] Florentine prostitutes could opt to pay an extra tax to live where

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[230] Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe,* 67.

[231] Ibid., 69.

[232] Ibid., 121.

[233] Ibid., 230.

[234] Pullan, "Catholics, Protestants, and the Poor," 455.

[235] Tessa Storey, "Fragments from the 'life Histories' of Jewellery Belonging to Prostitutes in Early-modern Rome," *Renaissance Studies* 19, no. 5 (2005), 649.

they pleased and disregard sumptuary laws.[236] Because of the extravagant luxurious attire worn by Italian courtesans, sumptuary laws focused on preventing these women from emulating respectable women.[237]

In the many areas where prostitution became illegal during the early modern era, women still working as prostitutes were no longer just marginalized members of society; now they were criminals as well. Merry Wiesner-Hanks argues that the closure of municipal brothels did not end the practice of prostitution but reshaped it. The women moved to the areas immediately outside of the city walls, established small illegal brothels, and bribed police and other authorities to look the other way.[238] Although this may seem reminiscent of the additional tax women in Florence could pay to ease up on local regulations, it had the added stigma of being "bad" behavior, unlike the legal taxes. Prostitutes often spent time in prison and, through the connections they made there, often ultimately began participating in other criminal activities as well. Some women even purposely got themselves arrested because there were so few opportunities for paid work, but they were paid for the work they performed in jail.[239]

There is still much work left to be done bridging the gap in the research of prostitution between the medieval and early modern eras. Taking a deeper look at this transition period in the acceptance of prostitution could add greatly to our understandings of changing societal

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[236] Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe,* 122.

[237] Storey, "Fragments from the 'life Histories' of Jewellery," 649.

[238] Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe,* 122.

[239] Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe,* 123.

views about women and sexuality overall. Although there was some pushback and prostitutes were often the subjects of victimization, medieval society was largely tolerant of the trade. They viewed it as beneficial to the moral integrity of others in society by providing a method of filtering sin, so it did not pollute the rest of the population; but, just as the beast turned on the whore of Babylon, European society increasingly turned on its prostitutes after the late Middle Ages.

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